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**Citation for published version:**

Boswell, C & Rodrigues, E 2016, 'Policies, politics and organisational problems: Multiple streams and the implementation of targets in UK government', *Policy and Politics*, vol. 44, no. 4, pp. 507-524.  
<https://doi.org/10.1332/030557315X14477577990650>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1332/030557315X14477577990650](https://doi.org/10.1332/030557315X14477577990650)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Policy and Politics

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copy edited version of an article published in Policy & Politics. The definitive publisher-authenticated version of Boswell, C., & Rodrigues, E. (2016). Policies, politics and organisational problems: Multiple streams and the implementation of targets in UK government. Policy and Politics, 44(4), 507-524 is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1332/030557315X14477577990650>

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**Policies, Politics and Organizational Problems:**  
**Multiple Streams and the Implementation of Targets in UK Government**

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Accepted in *Policy and Politics*, 8 September 2015

*Abstract*

Kingdon's multiple streams approach has recently been applied to study implementation across sectors or levels of government. Building on these contributions, we suggest that two streams are especially important in shaping implementation: organizational problem constructions, and political pressure from the centre. These variables produce a four-way typology of implementation modes. We test the model by analysing implementation of UK targets on asylum, defence and climate change, drawing on 54 semi-structured interviews with policy actors. The analysis shows how organizations can shift between modes of implementation over time, responding to changes in organizational problems and central political commitment to the policy.

The multiple streams approach (MSA) developed by John Kingdon (1984) is enjoying something of a renaissance, with a number of recent contributions suggesting new and extended applications of the theory. While MSA was originally developed to explain agenda-setting in US public policy, many authors have suggested that it offers a useful framework for studying two additional aspects of policymaking. Firstly, MSA has been used to explain how policies developed by a central or superordinate authority are applied across sectors or levels of government (Cairney 2009; Ackrill and Kay 2011; Ackrill and Zahariadis 2013; Bache 2013; Bache and Reardon 2013). The second, often overlapping, application of MSA is to explain policy implementation following the initial stage of agenda setting (Lemieux 2002; Zahariadis 2003; Exworthy and Powell 2004; Ridde 2009; Howlett, McConnell and Perl 2014). In line with these contributions, we believe that MSA is well suited to analyse how policies are applied

and implemented across space and over time. By conceiving of policies, problems and politics as largely independent streams, MSA allows one to treat policy as an exogenous variable, developed or imposed by a central or superordinate authority. How this policy is implemented then depends on its confluence with local or sectoral problem and politics streams.

However, we suggest that MSA needs further theoretical specification in order to be usefully applied to explain implementation across units or sectors. We propose drawing on theories from organizational sociology to develop a number of theoretical claims about how the convergence or divergence of streams affects implementation. This implies focusing on the organizations in the public administration responsible for the detailed elaboration and implementation of policy. We suggest that two streams are particularly influential in shaping implementation: organizational problem constructions, which need to find a match with policy emanating from the central or superordinate authority; and the political stream, especially the level of commitment of the central authority to the policy. We argue that different configurations of these two streams yield four possible implementation modes: consensual implementation, bottom-up implementation, non-implementation, and coercive implementation/decoupling.

In the second part of the paper we test and refine these claims by analysing the implementation of targets in three areas of UK policy: asylum, defence procurement and climate change. The implementation of targets under the Labour government of 1997-2010 offers an excellent case for applying our modified MSA. Through its series of Public Service Agreement targets, the Labour government attempted to roll out a single solution (performance targets) across a range of different policy areas, each of which was characterised by a distinct politics stream, and diverse organizational problems. The analysis is based on 54 semi-structured interviews conducted with government officials, special advisors and politicians involved in developing and implementing targets in the core executive and in the respective government departments.

## 1. The Multiple Streams Approach and Policy Implementation

John Kingdon's Multiple Streams Approach (MSA) has recently been revived as a framework for analysing multi-level governance. MSA is well suited to analysing and comparing how territorial sub-units or sectors appropriate and implement policy, in large part because of its separation of different 'streams' influencing policy. It lends itself to a research design that holds 'policy' constant, while explaining its implementation in terms of local or sectoral dynamics.

According to MSA, policy change occurs where there is a confluence of three largely independent streams: problems, policies, and politics. *Problems* are defined as conditions considered to be in need of change. Such problems often emerge following crises or focusing events; or as a result of monitoring practices that identify changes in trends or short-comings of particular programmes (Kingdon 1984/2014: 90-113). *Policies* are the manifold ideas or 'solutions' floating around the policy community at any given time. For an idea to be taken seriously, it needs to be considered sufficiently feasible, cost effective, and broadly acceptable to the policy community and the public (131-9). Finally, the stream of *politics* refers to changes in policy-makers' perceptions of public opinion or the 'national mood' (146); changes in the configuration of organised political forces such as interest groups or parties; or changes in government, such as a new administration, or changes to key personnel or departmental jurisdictions (153-5).

Kingdon argues that policy change occurs where policy entrepreneurs are able to couple solutions to problems in a way that is politically acceptable. Frequently, such entrepreneurs have pet solutions that they have been nurturing for some time, awaiting a political 'window' to press for their adoption. Such windows may be opened by a focusing event, an election, or at a key stage in a budgetary cycle (Howlett 1998).

Kingdon's account builds on earlier garbage can models of policy change (Cohen et al 1972), according to which solutions are not formulated in response to problems. Instead, pre-defined solutions are attached to new problems. Thus ideas or solutions can float around largely independently of the other two streams. Ideas are taken as a given, as part of the external environment; it is changes in problems and politics that drive the adoption of the ideas associated with policy change. This treatment of ideas as an autonomous stream makes MSA well suited to explaining the transposition or implementation of policy across jurisdictions or policy sectors (Exworthy and Powell 2004; Cairney 2009; Ridde 2009; Ackrill, Kay and Zahariadis 2013; Bache 2013; Bache and Reardon 2013). Following Matland (1995: 154) we understand implementation as the adjustments to procedures and programmes formulated in response to authoritative decisions. MSA allows us to explain such adjustments in terms of variations in the problem and politics streams, while keeping the policy stream constant. Thus it provides conceptual space for exploring how a solution emerging in one particular context or jurisdiction may be grafted on to quite different types of problems at different points of time, in different contexts, or at different levels of government.

Yet there is a lively ongoing debate about how to apply MSA to the study of policy implementation. Zahariadis has argued that the three streams approach can be applied to explain problem specification and decision-making: it can explain why policy-makers choose one policy alternative over another (Zahariadis 2003: 10). Other scholars have argued instead that consecutive stages of policy-making are characterised by different configurations of streams. Building on work by Lemieux (2002), Ridde suggests that the politics stream becomes less critical at implementation stage, with effective action requiring only the confluence of policies and problems (Ridde 2009). By contrast, Howlett, McConnell and Perl (2014) have argued that additional streams need to be factored in at the stages of policy formulation and decision-making, to capture the importance of processes and programmes.

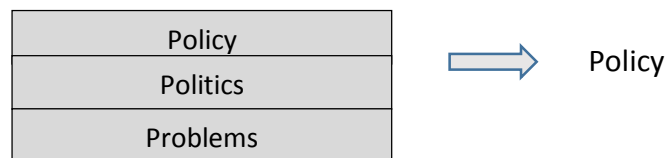
How are we to choose between these different approaches? Taken as standalone conceptual frameworks or models, they offer quite abstract metaphors of policy processes which are difficult to operationalise and test through empirical research (Sabatier 2007). As a number of critics have suggested, it is difficult conceptually to delineate the different streams. For example, the policy and politics stream can influence problem construction, making it difficult to distinguish them (Knaggård 2015). The problem of delineating explanatory variables becomes more complex where additional streams are introduced and these are imputed more or less strength, as in Howlett, McConnell and Perl's (2014) account. Because of these problems, a number of authors have suggested that MSA is at best a pattern theory, a heuristic to help identify different variables through historical analysis (Barzelay and Gallego 2006; Ackrill and Kay 2011). It lacks sufficient analytical clarity to produce testable hypotheses.

We agree that applications of MSA tend to lack theoretical specification. Implicit in such accounts are various assumptions about how policy actors construct policy problems; how such constructions are influenced by political dynamics; and how such problems become attached to policies and solutions. By better specifying these assumptions, we can develop more precise claims about the relationship between different streams, at different stages of policy-making. We suggest that an obvious candidate for such theoretical elaboration is organizational theory. Organizations in the public administration are central to understanding implementation. Government departments, ministries and agencies are typically responsible for the detailed elaboration and implementation of policy. They are the key sites in which authoritative decisions are made, procedures are established, and programmes are rolled out. Thus it makes sense to explore the dynamics shaping their behaviour. Such an organizational approach is, moreover, faithful to MSA's origins in the garbage can theory (Cohen et al 1972), which was developed as a model to explain decision-making in organizations.

So how can organizational theory help us to apply MSA to explain implementation across units? First, in line with Zahariadis' (2003) account, we assume that policy, politics and problem streams need to converge at the central or superordinate level to produce policy decisions (see Diagram 1). The centre's commitment to the chosen solution is then conveyed to relevant subordinate or sectoral organizations, and their compliance sought through a variety of means, including legislation or administrative procedures, organizational reform, budgetary adjustments or forms of conditionality.

Diagram 1

*Decision-making (central/superordinate authority)*



In order to understand how such policies are implemented at local or sectoral level, however, we need to understand the relationship between the streams in a different way, and for this we draw on insights from organizational theory. First, we assume that organizations involved in policy implementation are dependent on the support of their political leaders for legitimacy and resources (Aldrich and Pfeffer 1976). Members of organizations are therefore keen to read signals from political actors in their environment about appropriate behaviour, and will seek to adjust their rhetoric and practices accordingly. Thus stronger political commitment and scrutiny from the centre is likely to be picked up by members of the organization, and generate efforts to adjust action in the direction required. This political pressure can be conceived of as a 'political stream' in the organization's environment. This generates a first expectation, namely that the level of political commitment by the centre will influence the implementation of policy at local level. Strong political commitment to a policy by the centre is likely to put pressure on the implementing organization to adjust their structures and/or practices.

However, institutional theory suggests that organizations may face a number of obstacles to meeting external requirements. While organizations need to respond to demands from influential actors in their environment, they are also preoccupied with securing support from their members (Brunsson 1985). Organizations need to develop shared norms and beliefs to make sense of their role and objectives, and of their organizational environment. Such frames play an important role in securing support from members of the organization, through reducing complexity and providing a sense of identity and purpose (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Scott 1995). These frames include beliefs about organizational problems, whether in the form of internal defects (such as inefficient procedures, poor performance, or conflicts between different parts of the organization); or challenges emanating from the organization's environment (such as unrealistic expectations or conflicting demands). As Cohen et al. argue (1972), such problems are continually being produced within organizations, and may become attached to solutions or policies depending on choice opportunities: occasions at which organizations are expected to make decisions. Since such choice opportunities are created on a regular basis in political organizations, there are ongoing opportunities to match organizational problems to solutions.

Where problems find a fit with policies emanating from the external environment, we can expect organizations to adjust to such requirements and implement policy. But where such external requirements are seen to compromise or disrupt organizational attempts to address organizational problems, then the organization may respond by decoupling its formal structures or rhetoric from informal practices (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Orton and Weick 1990; Bromley and Powell 2012). Such decoupling implies a separation between the organization's symbolic or rhetorical commitment to the policy, which is adjusted to meet expectations of political actors in its environment; and its informal organizational practices, which may remain largely unchanged (Brunsson 2002). Decoupling is thus an attempt to reconcile external directives with



internal organizational requirements. It is especially rife in ‘political’ organizations, which are preoccupied with responding to numerous and inconsistent demands from their environment (Brunsson 2002: 19). These insights about organizational responses to external pressure generate a second expectation: where organizational problems do not fit the policy emanating from the central or superordinate authority, then we can expect weaker implementation.

These two dimensions intersect, producing four possible scenarios. Table 1 represents these scenarios as a four-way typology of organizational responses to central policy, or what we call modes of implementation.

Figure 1 visualises each of the four implementation modes in terms of the convergence or divergence of the three streams. The policy and politics streams are shaded grey, to signify that they emanate from the central level; the problem stream is white, to show that it is produced at local or sectoral level by implementing organization. Clearly, defining politics as emanating solely from the centre overlooks the potential role of local or sectoral politics in shaping implementation. In this model, such local dynamics are assumed to be absorbed by the organization, feeding into its problem construction. This simplification allows us to develop a more wieldy model, and to focus attention on the relationship between central politics and the implementing organization.

Table 1 Implementation modes

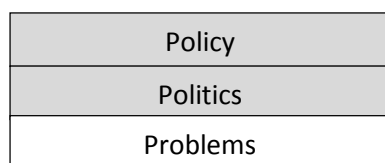
*Politics stream*

		<i>Strong</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Problem fit</i>	<i>Strong</i>	Consensual implementation	Bottom-up implementation
	<i>Weak</i>	Coercive implementation/ decoupling	Non-implementation

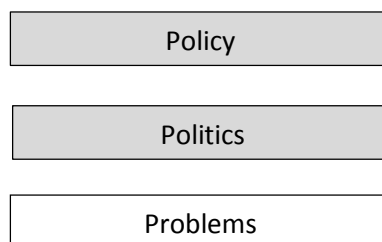
*Consensual implementation.* The top left cell depicts a scenario where both conditions are met: there is strong political support and a good fit with problems. Under these conditions, we hypothesise that the implementing organization will embrace the solution and adjusts its policies and practices accordingly. This does not necessarily imply that the organization will be successful in achieving the desired outcome. The point is that it cooperates with central authorities in introducing the adjustments it considers necessary to produce such outcomes. This mode can also be depicted as a confluence of politics, problem and policy, as in the top left cell of Diagram 2.

Diagram 2 Implementation (local/sectoral)

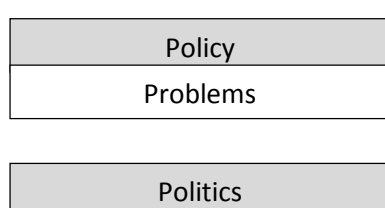
*Consensual*



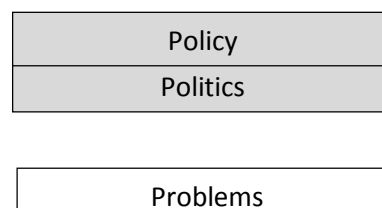
*Non-implementation*



*Bottom-up*



*Coercive*



*Non-implementation.* Conversely, if neither conditions are met – there is weak or no political support – then we hypothesise non-implementation. Neither the central authority nor the local/sectoral level organization is motivated to take the actions necessary to introduce the required organizational adjustments. As depicted in the top right cell of Diagram 2, the three streams diverge.

*Bottom-up implementation.* This represents a scenario in which central political backing is weak but there is a good fit between policy and organizational problem construction. Our hypothesis is that under these conditions, the ‘local’ organization will drive implementation. The centre is not strongly committed to imposing the policy, but there is a good fit with organizational problems, and policy entrepreneurs at local or sectoral level may try to adopt the preferred policy on their own initiative (Diagram 2, bottom left cell).

*Coercive implementation/decoupling.* Finally, if there is strong political backing and a weak fit to the problem, then two modes of implementation are likely. Either the centre is able to impose

implementation through applying strong pressure or sanctions, a scenario we describe as coercive implementation. However, literature on organizational studies suggests that this form of coercive implementation rarely succeeds (Brunsson and Olsen 1993). A far more likely scenario is that of decoupling. In such cases there is a gap between rhetorical commitment to the policy and informal practice within the organization. As in the bottom right cell of Diagram 2, this can be depicted as a confluence of politics and policy, but with only loose convergence – or divergence – with the problem stream.

## **2. Applying the typology: targets in asylum, defence procurement, and climate change**

We now apply this model to analyse how a solution developed by UK central authorities was implemented across different sectors in UK government. We refer to these central authorities as the ‘core executive’ (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990), in this case the Prime Minister’s Office and Delivery Unit, and the Treasury. Between 1998-2010, the Labour government adopted a series of performance targets to set and monitor objectives across all main departments. We examine how these targets were implemented in the key government department responsible for implementation in each policy area. Each of these departments was required to introduce targets over this period. However, the three policy areas vary across one of the dimensions noted above: political commitment to drive through targets. Asylum targets in the Home Office were subject to strong political backing, reflecting the political salience of the problem and continued intervention from the Treasury, and from the Prime Minister’s Office and Delivery Unit (or ‘No.10’). Climate change targets were less politically salient, and although they were backed by the Treasury and No.10 (and indeed some of them were codified in international treaties), they were never a top priority for the core executive. Defence procurement was largely

free from public political attention over most of this period and the Ministry of Defence enjoyed more autonomy by virtue of its mandate and military culture. In terms of the ‘fit’ of the target ‘solution’ to sectoral problems, the story is more complex and we shall examine the dynamics of problem construction in each sector in the course of the analysis.

In line with our theoretical approach, we focus on the implementation of targets within the organizations responsible for elaborating and overseeing the implementation of policy in each of the three areas. Our analysis draws on 54 interviews, 47 of which were carried out in 2014-15 as part of an ESRC project on The Politics of Monitoring, and the other 7 in 2007 as part of an EU 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme project on the political uses of knowledge. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with policy actors based in the respective departments and in the core executive: current and former officials from the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department of Energy and Climate Change, the Environment Agency, the Committee on Climate Change, the Treasury and No.10; and former ministers, special advisors and Members of Parliament active in relevant select committees. Transcripts of the interviews were coded in NVivo according to organizational constructions of problems, policies and politics streams; as well as categories which captured ideas, themes and processes emerging from the responses that gave insight into the deliberations and practices involved in policy making (Glaser and Strauss 2009; Wagenaar 2011). This more grounded theoretical aspect of coding allowed us to examine how policy actors made sense of the pressures, problems and opportunities facing them and their organizations, in line with the institutionalist theory of organizations sketched earlier.

### *Targets under the UK Labour Government, 1998-2010*

In 1998, the Labour government rolled out a series of performance targets as part of the new Public Service Agreements (PSAs) agreed between the Treasury and each major government department. PSAs set out broad strategic goals and a number of specific, measurable targets, as well as a system for monitoring performance against targets. The use of targets became more central to the Blair's strategy for reforming public services from 2001, when the PM set up a new Delivery Unit (PMDU), headed by Michael Barber. The PMDU played a central role in setting, prioritising and ensuring the implementation of performance targets across government until the late 2000s.

Targets were viewed by the core executive as a device for both signalling and galvanising improvement to public services (Boswell 2014). As is now well-documented, Blair was keen to introduce radical improvement to public service delivery, and to demonstrate such improvements (Barber 2008; Blair 2010). Targets were seen as the appropriate device for effecting such change and for monitoring and communicating the relevant improvements (Panchamia and Thomas 2014). But targets also addressed a second problem over this period. As part of the new PSA system, targets were appropriated by the Chancellor Gordon Brown and the Treasury as a means of tightening their grip on the spending and programmatic priorities of Whitehall departments (James 2004; Boyne and Law 2013). Through the PSA targets, the Treasury was able to keep a tight rein on policy and expenditure across government, well beyond its traditional remit.

Following the multiple streams approach, we can understand the politics stream facilitating the adoption of this approach as the change of administration (the new Labour government), and the establishment of the PMDU. While it may be inappropriate to speak of a 'national mood' that supported such a technocratic tool of governance, the policy community and the corporate

sector were broadly supportive of new public management techniques over this period. Blair, Brown and Barber acted as policy entrepreneurs, attaching the target ‘solution’ to their respective problems at a propitious political moment. Thus the targets were keenly embraced by the core executive. However, as we shall see, modes of implementation varied substantially across policy sectors.

### *Asylum*

In the first half of the 2000s, the UK core executive – notably No. 10 and the Treasury – were strongly committed to applying targets in the area of asylum. The UK had experienced a rapid rise in asylum applications in the late 1990s, which became the subject of critical media coverage and accusations of mismanagement. The core executive was keen to signal its commitment to dealing with the problem. In negotiation with the Treasury, the Home Office developed a series of targets on processing asylum applications and the removal of rejected applicants. A further target of halving the number of asylum seekers was personally announced by Tony Blair in 2003. These targets served a clear political purpose, adopted to underline the government’s resolve to dealing with the problem. The aspiration was not merely rhetorical. From 2001, asylum had become one of a handful of targets prioritised by No.10, and subjected to the full PMDU treatment: monthly stocktakes with the PM, twice yearly ‘traffic light’ reviews, and the elaboration of detailed trajectories outlining action to achieve the target. In terms of the framework outlined above, this implied strong political commitment to targets on the part of the core executive.

This strong political commitment was clearly perceived by members of the Home Office. Senior management were acutely aware that the organization was seen as poorly managed and ineffective. The targets were reluctantly embraced as a ‘necessary evil’ (interview, February 2014). Yet many senior managers, and most staff in the operational wing of the organization,

were highly sceptical. There was a sense that targets and the associated changes were ‘being done to them rather than with them’ (interview, August 2014). The targets on removals, asylum processing and asylum applications were seen as overly ambitious, and as failing to take account of the complexities of this area. A number of formal adjustments to organizational structures and procedures in the early 2000s failed to produce the required improvement, and by 2004 the core executive was frustrated at the lack of progress in meeting asylum targets. In this phase, then, the lack of confluence between the solution and organizational problem constructions led to decoupling of formal structures and informal action.

From around 2006, however, a combination of factors generated more consensual implementation of asylum targets. First, the politics stream became more focused on the problem of organizational performance. A scandal over removals in March 2005 drew political attention to problems of inefficiency and poor information management in the Home Office. This led to a more concerted effort by the core executive and the Home Office’s political leadership to improve organizational performance, through a major programme of reforms and renewal of senior management, as well as more rigorous performance monitoring. This more robust approach, combined with a new and more compliant senior management, led to a phase of consensual implementation. This is not to say that the targets were comprehensively implemented across the organization, or that they were consistently met. Yet we can identify extensive organizational adjustments to implement targets.

Paradoxically, just as the Home Office was swinging behind implementation, from around 2007 targets were becoming less prominent as a political communication tool. The PM and Home Secretary found that targets were not bringing the expected dividends in terms of public support. As one official put it, there was no ‘air time’ for publicising success in meeting targets (interview, February 2014). Thus the core executive’s political commitment to targets in



asylum declined in the late 2000s. In the terms of our typology, this suggests a switch from strong to weak political backing by the core executive.

Yet the use of targets as a management tool within the Home Office continued unabated. If anything, the PSA architecture became more complex, with Home Office documents over this period containing ever more detailed and complex sets of targets and indicators. Targets permeated all levels of administration, ranging from the headline targets featured in PSAs, to the micro targets guiding the work of individual case workers in regional offices across the UK. As one senior manager explained, they had tried to go without targets for a couple of months, but officials began to complain that they ‘didn’t know what success looked like’ (interview, August 2014). Targets had become internalised as part of the normal organizational culture and shaped officials’ definition of what constituted good performance. Despite the numerous criticisms levelled against them, and the accession of a new government in 2010 that was resolved to do away with targets, they remain as ubiquitous as ever in Home Office administration (interview, December 2013).

This suggests that once targets had become accepted as a management tool within the organization, they could be applied to mop up a variety of problems, in ways that were not originally anticipated. The Home Office may have initially been guarded about the use of targets, but by the end of the 2000s, this had become a completely normal way to set goals and measure performance across the organization. We can therefore identify a shift over time from decoupling and coercive implementation; to a scenario of bottom-up implementation, under which political backing had declined, but targets continued to be valued as a means of addressing organizational problems.

### *Defence procurement*

On assuming power in 1997, the new Labour government faced a significant overspend in the Ministry of Defence (MoD) budget, and persistent delays in the procurement of equipment. Not surprisingly, then, the PSA targets were focused on limiting overspend and overrun in procurement processes. The 1998 PSA targets aimed to prevent in-year increases in major project costs, and in-year slippage of in-service dates of new and existing projects. Thus similar to the asylum case, the targets were deployed by the Treasury and the MoD's political leadership as a means of addressing ongoing dysfunctionalities in the way the organization worked.

Yet unlike in the case of asylum, defence procurement targets failed to attract the same degree of commitment within or outside of the organization. Part of this can be attributed to the politics stream: in particular, the fact that defence procurement was not a politically salient issue, and rather low down the priorities of No.10. While UK operations in Afghanistan and Iraq attracted substantial political attention over this period, equipment and procurement remained low profile. Indeed, these operations were being equipped through a separate stream of fast-tracked acquisition to meet 'urgent operational requirements', and this procedure was given a relatively clean bill of health by the National Audit Office (NAO 2009). Similarly the Treasury, while concerned about overspend, was not as engaged in scrutinising the organizational structures and practices generating these problems. It was prepared to cut the overall procurement budget, but did not feel sufficiently concerned or capable of intervening to ensure that targets were met. This may partly be explained by the fact that the government saw the MoD as something of a 'black box', whose culture and practices were largely impenetrable to others in government (interviews, December 2013, August 2014). As a result, targets in defence procurement never received strong political backing from the core executive.

Neither were targets embraced by the MoD as an appropriate solution to internal organizational problems. While senior managers in the Ministry were acutely aware of the dysfunctionality of procurement procedures, they were unconvinced that targets offered an appropriate solution. There was a general sense that the targets failed to grasp the complexity of decision-making in this area. MoD officials felt that these crude quantified targets overlooked the multiple economic and strategic considerations guiding procurement (interview, March 2014).

This lack of fit with internal organizational problems, combined with lukewarm political commitment from the centre, meant that targets were not effectively implemented in the MoD. The organization failed to address the key structural problems that were producing inefficiencies. In particular, the three services (army, navy, airforce) continued to compete for resources from the same budget, creating incentives for each to push for new acquisitions, typically with overly-optimistic pricing and timescales. Once these projects passed through the initial approval threshold, or ‘main gate’ as it was known, they were rarely abandoned. As one official put it, ‘it was still the case that no project was ever turned down’, with the result that the budget was ‘overstuffed with programmes’, each experiencing cost inflation (interview, March 2014).

However, the fact that the MoD was formally committed to meeting its PSA targets made it impossible to disregard these commitments. This led to widespread decoupling, with the MoD embracing targets in their formal structures and rhetoric, but failing to adjust its acquisition procedures. There was also evidence of widespread gaming of targets (Hood 2006), with officials delaying the delivery of equipment to defer costs to subsequent reporting periods, or rescaling commissions in order to meet cost targets (interview, December 2013). As the Gray report noted (2009: 28), budget shortfalls were being addressed by ‘re-profiling’ – delaying programmes to defer costs, resulting in further schedule slippage and even higher costs.

Thus while the Treasury and the political leadership of MoD were generally keen to reform procurement procedures, there was a lack of the commitment and drive necessary to overcome intransigence within the MoD. With defence procurement not attracting significant political attention, neither Gordon Brown nor the PM and his Delivery Unit saw it as a priority. With only moderate political backing, and a lack of fit with internal organizational problems, targets were poorly implemented in MoD practice, and were the object of decoupling.

### *Climate change*

While the UK government had been largely autonomous in setting targets for asylum and defence, its hands were partially tied in defining targets on climate change. In 2002 the Treasury agreed two main targets with the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)<sup>1</sup>. The first of these was that of ‘reducing greenhouse-gas emissions by 12.5% from 1990 levels’; the second was a vaguer target of ‘moving towards a 20% reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2010’ (Treasury 2002: 27). The first target of reducing greenhouse-gas emissions had already been adopted in the Kyoto Protocol of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, agreed in outline in 1997. In that sense, the government was merely codifying a pre-existing international target. It was also widely seen as an easily attainable target, given the switch to gas-fired power stations being rolled out over this period.

The second goal of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> sources by 2010 was more ambitious, emanating from a 1997 manifesto commitment. As such, it was a politically driven target, adopted to signal Labour’s commitment to tackling climate change while the party was still in opposition. Once the target was in the public domain, the government found itself bound to re-articulate it, and to measure performance against the target. As one interviewee put it, ‘It was a very high level goal’; however, ‘there was no plan setting out how we would achieve that 20% baseline’ (interview,

February 2014). In fact, it proved to be a difficult target to deliver, implying making more challenging adjustments to behaviour, for example reducing emissions from motor vehicles (see Johnston and Deeming 2015 for a recent analysis of attitudes to climate change and travel behaviour in the UK).

There is no doubt that the Treasury and No.10 were both committed to climate change targets. The government was keen to signal its commitment to international and domestic audiences that the UK was no longer going to be the 'dirty man' of Europe. It was also responding to an increasingly well-organised and specialised lobby in the UK: NGOs such as the Friends of the Earth were strongly campaigning for action on climate change, culminating in the high profile 'Big Ask' campaign launched in 2005 (Carter and Jacobs 2014). And indeed, its commitment appeared to strengthen from the mid-2000s onwards. The PSA Delivery Agreement of October 2007 set out the objective of leading the 'global effort to avoid dangerous climate change', and referred to the draft Climate Change Bill's aim of setting CO<sub>2</sub> emissions for 2050 at least 60% lower than the reference year, 1990. This introduced significantly more demanding emissions-reductions targets for the UK, albeit in the mid-term future. The shift can partly be explained by diminishing progress in reaching targets after 2006, largely generated by the increasing cost of gas and a relative decrease in carbon prices on the European carbon market. The more ambitious target also implied the government's desire to position the Labour Government at the vanguard of international action on climate change.

However, climate change was never a top priority for No.10 or the Treasury. Indeed, much of the drive to set and implement targets came from Defra and its successor, the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC). Targets were seen by both organizations as an important means of leveraging resources and influence within government. We saw earlier that the Home Office was constantly seeking to reduce external scrutiny and ensure targets were not overly stretching. Officials working on climate change by contrast saw targets as a way of moving

their priorities up the policy agenda. A former policy official sets this out clearly: ‘It was actually a very positive way of, you know, bringing others along rather than just doing it from Defra which, you know, was a tiny department basically’ (interview, June 2014). This leverage was enhanced in the aftermath of the Climate Change Act in 2008, with the emergence of the Committee on Climate Change and the setting of legally binding carbon budgets, which gave DECC added clout through creating more robust independent audit. Targets for cutting emissions had implications well beyond DECC’s remit, for example for transport, industry, infrastructure and trade. Thus the rigorously enforced targets after 2008 considerably strengthened DECC’s role within government. As one former official acknowledged, ‘it was part of the day to day running of the department; [it] felt that the carbon budgets were an important thing that everyone was sort of backing, trying to deliver’ (interview, February 2014).

Also important was the role of political leaders in Defra and DECC (Carter and Jacobs 2014). As one interviewee noted, ‘the big diplomatic push from government begins actually with Margaret Beckett and David Miliband’ (interview, May 2014). Beckett and Miliband both served as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, before moving to the post of Foreign Secretary. The establishment of a dedicated team within the Foreign Office to accompany international climate change negotiations, and the innovative appointment of ‘climate attachés’ in British Embassies, both reinforced the UK’s commitment to targets, and strengthened its role in shaping the international agenda.

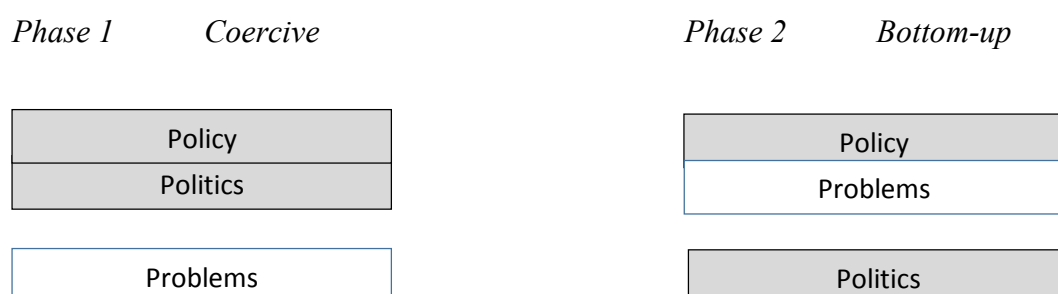
In sum, emissions targets provided the government with a tool that fitted emerging international policy on climate change, and offered a device for signalling the UK’s growing commitment to taking a lead in global governance in this area. However, the main impetus for setting and implementing ambitious targets came from within Defra and DECC. The PSA targets, and subsequently the more rigorous architecture set up by the Climate Change Act, promised to

attract resources and lend more influence to a policy area that Defra and DECC were keen to push up the policy agenda. In this sense, the application of targets can be understood as an example of bottom-up implementation. While central political commitment to the targets was only moderate, targets found a good fit with organizational problem constructions. This resulted in commitment to targets being driven largely by senior management and political leaders of Defra and DECC.

### 3. Discussion

Analysis of the three cases largely confirmed our hypotheses about how the convergence of streams affects implementation. In the case of asylum, there was a confluence of the target solution and the politics stream in the early 2000s, but only loose alignment of these streams with the organization's problem construction. This initially produced decoupling, and then coercive implementation as the core executive stepped up its intervention and monitoring to drive through organizational adjustment (phase 1). Towards the end of the decade, however, the politics stream became detached from the policy and problem streams. By this time, the organization had internalised targets as an appropriate solution to a range of organizational problems, generated by adjustments to its problem stream (phase 2). This produced what we refer to as bottom-up implementation. This shift is represented in diagram 3.

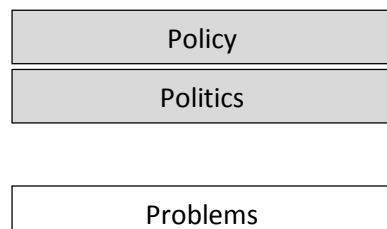
Diagram 3 Implementation of asylum targets



What is notable about this case is the switch in implementation modes over time, which was produced by changes in the politics stream and, more importantly, by a shift in organizational problem constructions.

In the case of defence we can observe a combination of decoupling and non-implementation. Political commitment to the targets was weaker than in the case of asylum, and the core executive lacked the will and the capacity to impose reform on the MoD. The MoD was therefore able to avoid introducing substantial adjustments to organizational practice. However, the organization did perceive the need to adjust certain of its practices in order to be seen to be meeting targets, decoupling rhetoric from informal practice. We can depict this as weak confluence of policy and politics, detached from the problem stream. This produced a combination of our decoupling and non-implementation modes, as depicted in Diagram 4.

Diagram 4 Implementation of defence targets



Finally, the climate change case offers another example of a switch in modes of implementation over time. In this case, we can observe an initial confluence of the three streams, with the politics stream being represented by both international and national political considerations. However, targets were thoroughly embraced by senior management in Defra and especially its successor DECC as a solution to organizational problems. Thus implementation came to be driven by bottom-up commitment to implementation. In this case the political stream did not diverge, but was replaced or superseded by the organizational problem stream (Diagram 5).

Diagram 5 Implementation of climate change targets



*Phase 1      Consensual*

Policy
Politics
Problems

*Phase 2      Bottom-up*

Policy
Problems
Politics

One of the most striking findings from our empirical analysis is that modes of implementation can shift over time. One reason for such shifts is changes in the politics stream. Political commitment to a particular solution may wax and wane over time: political attention tends to be short-lived, and is likely to shift in response to new focusing events or institutional changes. This need not be fatal to implementation. In line with Ridde's (2014) analysis, the politics stream does not need to remain tightly coupled to the policy and problem streams in order to sustain commitment to implementation. Far more important is that the policy fits organizational problem constructions. Where this is the case, implementation may be bottom-up. Moreover, we also saw that organizational problem constructions can change over time. So even where political commitment wanes, the organization may develop new problems that fit the policy, thus sustaining organizational commitment to implementation.

Far more problematic is where organizational problem constructions do not converge with the policy. Even where the political stream is strongly supportive of the solution, in such instances implementation will be difficult to achieve. Where this is the case, strong political pressure will need to be accompanied by robust intervention to steer organizational change. Given the challenges to such forms of coercive implementation, a far more likely scenario is organizational decoupling (Brunsson and Olsen 2003).

## Conclusion

This article sought to apply MSA to explain policy implementation across territorial units or sectors. We drew on institutionalist theories of organizations to develop a number of claims about how the convergence or divergence of streams influences implementation. We suggested that implementation is likely to be shaped by the relationship between two streams: the political stream, understood as the commitment of the central or superordinate authority to applying the policy; and the problem stream, defined as organizational constructions of problems. Different configurations of these two variables yield four possible modes of implementation: consensual implementation, bottom-up implementation, non-implementation, and coercive implementation/decoupling. We then tested this explanatory typology by applying it to the case of targets in the UK government, comparing the implementation of targets on asylum, defence procurement and climate change.

The analysis largely supported the model. However, it also suggested that organizations may shift between different modes of implementation, as a consequence of changes in the politics stream and/or the problem stream. In this sense, our application is closer to the original garbage can model on which Kingdon based his work. Cohen et al's (1972) model sought to analyse how participants attach different meanings to decisions over time, as new problems emerge. In line with this idea, we found that policies can perform different and unanticipated functions in organizations. Once adopted, policies may be grafted on to a range of different problems as they emerge (Edelman 1992).

MSA was famously based on institutionalist theories of organizations, but political science applications of the approach have tended to overlook this literature. We think it is time to rediscover MSA's rich heritage in organizational sociology. This becomes more pertinent when looking at multi-level governance and cross-sectoral analysis, where central policy and politics

streams can be much further removed from local, organizational problem streams. And it is also highly relevant to the analysis of policy implementation over time, a process that needs to be sustained through shifts in political attention and problem definition. Because of these distances of space and time – the distance between the central authority and local organization, and the time taken to implement policy – we can expect a strained and constantly evolving relationship between the different streams. Institutional organization theory is well placed to capture these tensions and changes in the coupling of solutions and problems over time, and thus offers an excellent way of grounding a multiple streams approach to implementation.

## **Notes**

1 Defra was responsible for climate change policy between 2001- 2008. In 2008 the Climate Change Act created DECC, which is responsible for implementing mitigation policies. Defra oversees the adaptation side of climate change policy.

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